

“Here Am I! Send Me!” Isaiah 6:1-13 (February 15, 2014)

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. ² Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³ And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory!”

⁴ And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. ⁵ And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

⁶ Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. ⁷ And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”

⁸ And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am! Send me.” ⁹ And he said, “Go, and say to this people: “ ‘Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’ ¹⁰ Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.”

¹¹ Then I said, “How long, O Lord?” And he said: “Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste, ¹² and the LORD removes people far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land. ¹³ And though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains when it is felled.” The holy seed is its stump.

PRAY

We are in our third week of a series on evangelism. Five churches in Oxford are working through the same Biblical texts all month looking at this subject. Evangelism means to tell the good news of Jesus Christ to other people. The good news that though we were sinners, alienated from God, God sent his son Jesus Christ to die on the cross for our sins. And on the third day following his death, Jesus was resurrected from the dead as proof that God really did accept Jesus’ sacrifice as payment for our sins, and now all who have trusted in Jesus are truly, completely, finally, forever reconciled to God, loved by him, adored by him. Not because of anything we have done or ever could do, but solely because of God’s grace.

That’s the gospel. Our text for today is about the commissioning, the call to evangelism, of Isaiah. This is one of the most famous passages in the Bible – when God asks who will go to the people of Israel and speak to them, Isaiah cries out, “Here am I! Send me!”

This is one of the most famous evangelistic passages in the Bible, and it's also a passage from which a million sermons on missions have been preached. Christian missionaries are those who go outside of their own culture and communicate the good news of Jesus to a different culture; it's cross-cultural evangelism. So, from this very famous text I hope to show you three things: *first, the reality of evangelism. Second, the power for evangelism. Third, the hope in evangelism.*

First, the reality of evangelism. The reality of evangelism – of telling the good news of Jesus to others – is that it's hard. After Verses 9-10: ⁹ And he said, "Go, and say to this people: "Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive."¹⁰ Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed."

God says, "Isaiah, your job is to be preach to a group of people who will never listen to you. You will be considered a complete failure professionally, no one will listen to you, they'll only make fun of you and despise you. You will face persecution to the end of your days, and you will see no fruit from your labors." Now these verses come after verse 8, where Isaiah so willingly committed himself to God. I've often wondered if Isaiah wanted to renege on his commitment after hearing how hard the task would be.

It is hard to do evangelism, to tell others the gospel. Why? *First*, no one in the world will reward you or congratulate you or appreciate you for doing the hard work of evangelism. The world sees evangelism as at best rude, at worst, intolerant. "Who are you to tell someone else what they should believe?" There aren't many sins left in modern American culture, but telling someone else they should believe the good news of Jesus is one of them.

Evangelism is despised in our culture. It will gain you nothing from the world but contempt. Even in the church, we tend to be very hesitant about it. Even in the church we tend to look askance at those who are too quick to share their faith.

Second, you can share your faith for a long time and not see any fruit. You can preach for a long time and not see any fruit. Apparently Isaiah preached for decades and didn't see many results.

This is especially true if you feel the call to become a missionary. I hope there are people in our church who do feel a call on their lives, have an intense desire, to go to some other part of our country or of our world, live there for years and years and years, and tell the people there the gospel. I hope that's true. Certainly that's one of the things I pray for about our church, that God would raise people up from Grace Bible Church and send them all over the world to tell others the good news.

But if you don't have a realistic view of evangelism, you won't last. Here's what will happen: there are several different groups of people listening to this sermon. Some of you will hear this sermon series on evangelism, and go home not really do anything

differently in your spiritual life. That's just the way it is – I know, because I sat it pews for 28 years before I became a pastor, and I'd hear these sermons on missions and evangelism, and I didn't talk about the good news of Jesus any more than before. That's just the way it is – I'm not mad about it, but that's my realistic view of evangelism.

Some of you will hear these sermons, and feel guilty because you're not doing evangelism, and maybe for a month really try to do it – and then you'll stop. Guilt over the long haul stinks as a motivation for evangelism. It doesn't work.

But then there's a third group who does not have a realistic view of evangelism, *but a romantic view of evangelism*. And these are the types that really will start a Bible study at work or organize some kind of outreach in their neighborhood, or become a pastor or even a missionary, and move off to some other culture and share the gospel with other people. You're motivated to do this. You're excited about telling others the gospel. But you hear me and others tell you how hard it is, how despised what you going to do is, how little fruit there may be for years, and you know what you're thinking? You'd never say it out loud, but you're thinking, "*It won't be like that for me*. Maybe it's that way for them, but it won't be for me. I'll be more effective and faithful. They will listen to me."

If that's your view, you know what you're saying? You're denying what God tells Isaiah. You're saying that, really, evangelism isn't that hard. "No, they couldn't do this, but I can. They will listen to me." And if that's you, then you must know that you are setting yourself and, if you've got one, your family up for a lot of pain. You're setting everyone up for disillusionment, disappointment, and maybe even despair. It's happened to so many well-meaning Christians who've gone off, determined to share the good news of Jesus with others, but wound up shipwrecking their family and even their faith. It is incredibly hard, unappreciated, and slow work when you share the gospel with other people.

You may think, "Well, J.D., if it's that hard, then how in the world can anyone do it?"

Second, the power for evangelism. Verses 1-4: In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. ² Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³ And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" ⁴ And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke.

Isaiah went to the temple for worship, like he had hundreds of times before, and something totally unexpected happened: *he had an encounter with God*. As more than one minister has put it: Isaiah went to church and found the last person he expected to meet there: God. And from this encounter I want to show you three things that must happen to you if you're going to be able to be faithful and last in telling the good news of Jesus to others.

First, Isaiah trembles before God's glory. We read that Isaiah had a vision of God where he was seated on a throne, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Now, the significance of that is lost on us because we aren't around king. And except for weddings, a lot of us are never around a robe, or a gown, with a long train.

But in the ancient world the longer the train of the robe of the regent the more powerful, the more wealthy, the more glorious the monarch was. I was not alive in 1953 for the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain. But I've watched it on Youtube, and I commend it to you. It is an awe-inspiring sight. She leaves her palace in a stage coach made of gold, drawn by eight horses, and when you see her get out at Westminster Abbey you can see how long the train of her robe is – it's at least twelve feet long, and it takes six maids to carry it. Then she comes into the church and she sits in King Edwards's chair, which every monarch since the fourteenth century has used. And then, item by item, they dress her. A gown of pure gold. Jeweled bracelets. Gloves, reflecting how gently the queen is to deal with her people. A sword given by the Archbishop of Canterbury. A scepter. And finally, they place St. Edward's crown on her head. And the abbey is filled clergy and nobility and they cry out, "God save the queen! God save the queen!"

It's quite impressive. But it pales in comparison to the vision of royalty Isaiah saw in the temple. It was no mere human monarch he saw that day – it was the Lord God Almighty. And the train of his robe filled the temple. Nor was the Lord God extolled by clergy and noblemen, but by seraphs, mighty, awe-inspiring six-winged angels, whose voices were so powerful that the very foundation of the temple quaked at their voice, and smoke filled the room. And what do they say?

We'll take the second part first: the seraphs call, "The whole earth is full of his glory." What does glory mean? Glory is a translation of the Hebrew word *kabod*, which most literally means "weight." To say that someone is glorious is to say that he has weight, there is a gravity about him, a seriousness, a substance, a significance to him.

Now, if you have an encounter with a God like that, what do you say? Do you say, "Oh, you want to be in my life. That's wonderful! You'll be a nice accessory to my life! You know, I have so many plans and so many things I want to do, and you'll go a long way in helping me accomplish them"? No. Of course not.

This God, the God whose glory fills the earth, is not your personal assistant. He is not your genie for whom your wish is his command. When this God, the God of Isaiah's commission, comes into your life, *you don't let him hang out in the suburbs of your life*, so that you can call him when you need something.

No, the only way this God comes into your life *is by coming all the way downtown and ruling your life from the very center of your soul*. God insists on being the center of your life. And, of course, the thought of giving complete control over your life to God should cause you to tremble. Jesus at one point says that people should count the cost before they decide to follow him. If God is in charge of your life, if his wish is your command,

who knows what it might cost you? Who knows what he will ask you to do? He may ask you to do some things you really don't want to do, but if he is at the center of your life then there is *nothing he cannot ask of you*.

But that's not all we learn from Isaiah's encounter. *Second, Isaiah is traumatized by God's holiness.* The seraphs don't just call to one another about God's glory. They also cry, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty."

In Hebrew, when they wanted to express superlativeness, they didn't have -er or -est suffixes (like holier, or holiest). They instead doubled or tripled the adjective to get that across. R.C. Sproul loves to use the example of Genesis 14, where we read how several kings during the time of Abraham engaged in battle in the Valley of Siddim, near the Dead Sea. And when some of the kings fled after their defeat, they fell into pits. But all the different modern translations of the Bible give different descriptions of these pits. Some say "tar pits," others "bitumen pits," and others "asphalt pits."

But in the original Hebrew text of the book of Genesis, it's just the Hebrew word for pit followed by the same Hebrew word for pit. These were pit pits the kings fell into. So Moses, who wrote Genesis, was saying there are pits, and then there are *pits*. Some pits are pittier than other pits, and these pits were the pittiest pits of all.

The seraphs cry that God isn't just holy, nor holy holy, but he is holy, holy, holy.

And in response, Isaiah says this in verse 5: ⁵ And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"

Isaiah encountered the holiness of God, and it caused him to cry out that he was lost, that he had no hope. And I love how the old King James Version puts it: "Woe is me, for I am undone." In others words, I'm falling apart. I am disintegrating in the presence of the holiness of God.

Now, why would he say that? *Because that's the natural consequence of imperfect people, sinners, encountering the greatness and perfection and majesty of God.* We see this in small ways all the time. Say you went to California on business. And on your return flight, just before takeoff, a very famous movie star comes down the aisle and sits down in the chair next to you. What would happen? Would you know what to say? Would you know what to do? For a lot of us, we'd try to make conversation, but we'd be so nervous, so intimidated by the greatness and majesty even of this person, that afterwards we'd say, "I was so nervous, I really couldn't even talk. You know, I just kind of fell apart." That's what we say when the pressure of a situation is too much for us – "I just fell apart."

Well, Isaiah didn't just meet a movie star; he met the creator of the universe. And Isaiah literally began to fall apart. He's disintegrating in God's presence. He had a self-quake. It was traumatic for Isaiah, so traumatic Isaiah pronounced a curse on himself (that's

what “woe is me” means) and said, “I am undone! I am falling apart. I’m going to die. I can’t survive in the presence of God.”

Imperfection, sin, cannot survive in the presence of God. The power, the weight, the holiness of God will destroy it. And of course, friends, when we stand before God on judgment day, if we stand before him in our sins, our imperfections, we will be finished, too.

Now, we may hear that and really dislike it. You may think, “Oh, there’s that’s hellfire and brimstone preaching. You know I left my last church because I didn’t want to hear anymore of that; I won’t come back here.” If that’s you, just hear me out one more minute.

In Deuteronomy 4:24, we read this: “For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.” But if the God of the Bible is a God who will consume, who will destroy, all sin, all imperfections, don’t you also see that we have in the God of the Bible a God who will not tolerate evil? Evil is a real thing in this world and I don’t think that can be denied. But in the God of the Bible we have a God will one day judge and completely destroy all the evil that causes so much of the pain and suffering of this world. Now, isn’t at least that part of Isaiah’s encounter good news?

I think it is. When you see the horrors of Syria today – a quarter of a million deaths and nine million refugees as a result of the civil war – and when you see how utterly unable our government and the governments of other sympathetic nations have been to do anything to stop the suffering, it gives me no small measure of comfort to know that one day *there will be a reckoning for those who caused this*. Evildoers will stand before the Lord God Omnipotent one day, and be forced to give an account for evil, and God will judge them for what they’ve done.

But Isaiah’s problem, and our problem, is this: we all have imperfections. We all have sin. It’s not just ISIS – all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. So how can God consume our imperfections, our sin, without consuming and destroying us?

Third, Isaiah is cleansed by God’s mercy. Verses 6-7: ⁶ Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar [that’s the altar in the temple, where sin offerings were burned up]. ⁷ And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”

That’s a lovely, powerful scene – but what does it mean? It surely does not mean that in the act of taking a hot coal from off the altar and touching it to Isaiah’s lips that, somehow, all Isaiah’s imperfections and sins were destroyed and atoned for. To atone for something means to make restitution for past mistakes. Touching a coal to Isaiah’s lips could not in and of itself atone for his sins.

So, what does it mean? Did you know that eight hundred years later, something very similar happened? We read in Matthew 27 that when Jesus died on the cross, there was an earthquake, rocks split, the temple was shaken, and the veil in the temple was torn in two.

And just before he died, Jesus cried out something: ⁴⁶ And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Matthew 27:46.

What’s Jesus saying? He saying: “Woe is me. I am undone. I am ruined. I feel like I’m coming apart.” But no angel showed up with a coal off the altar to cleanse Jesus and said, “Your sin is atoned for,” because Jesus was the sacrifice on the altar who would cleanse all the people who trust in him.

Jesus, who is the judge of the world who, when he first came to earth, came not to *bring* judgment but to *bear* judgment. He was took our sins upon him so that our sins could be atoned for by his righteous life, and in turn he was undone, he was destroyed, so that we could be loved by God. Out of sheer love and grace, Jesus substituted himself for us so that we could become children of God.

That’s the gospel. And that’s how a glorious, holy God can absolutely destroy all the sin and imperfection in the universe without also destroying us.

Now, what does all this have to do with evangelism? *The reason, and the only reason, Isaiah can say, “Here am I! Send me!” is because he has had this powerful encounter with the living God.* Once he’s had this encounter, he’s ready to go. Did you notice? Isaiah agrees to go before he ever hears how hard things will be. But it doesn’t matter – Isaiah’s had this encounter with the living God, so he’s ready to go, no matter how hard it will be – not because Isaiah thinks it will be different for him, not because he thinks he’ll be better at it than God says, but because he’s met God and he can’t help it. He must tell others about him.

Friends, Christianity is not an impersonal religion, where you agree in principle to certain truths but don’t personally encounter him. No, no, no – Christianity is the most personal religion on the planet. And you must meet God personally if you’re ever going to be a Christian through Jesus Christ if you’re ever going to tell other people the good news.

But if you do meet God personally – if you do see the glory, the holiness, and the grace of God in Jesus Christ (and that can happen – you can know those things as surely as Isaiah did, if not more so) then you can face the hard, cold facts about evangelism. You won’t walk out of here unconcerned about evangelism – you’ll want to tell others about Jesus. You won’t try to do it out of guilt, and then fail in a month. And you won’t be a romantic about it. You’ll be a part of a fourth group, a faithful group of Christians, who can look at the harsh reality of evangelism straight in the eye, how hard it is and how despised it is by the world around you, yet still do it – day after day, month after month,

year after year, doing the hard work of evangelism, because you've met God in Jesus Christ, and you long for others to do the same.

One last thing: third, the hope in evangelism. In verse 11, after God says that the people will be ever hearing but never understanding, ever seeing but never perceiving, Isaiah asks, "How long, O Lord, will the people refuse your message?" And God says, "Oh, it until foreign nations come and utterly destroy everything in Israel. The people will reject my message until they are destroyed." And you say, "Oh, nice."

But then we read the very last verse, verse 13: "And though a tenth remains in the land, it will again be laid waste. But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land." Isaiah 6:13 (NIV 1984). God says, "I'm going to cut Israel down like trees, then I'll burn the stumps. But even though only stumps are left, Isaiah your message will be like a seed in the stump, and from it I'll build my people again."

Friends, evangelism is hard work, the world won't appreciate it, and you may never see the fruit of it. That's hard to hear. But if you've met God then you can be sure you're planting seeds when you evangelize, and while you may never know when they'll bear fruit, and while you may never see them bear fruit, *you can be sure some will*. There's always hope in evangelism, because evangelism involves the Word of God, and the Word of God is a potent.

Later in Isaiah we read this: "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, ¹¹ so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it." Isaiah 55:10-11.

If you've met God, if you've been overwhelmed by his glory, his holiness, and his grace, then no matter how everything looks, you can be sure God is accomplishing his purposes. You can be glad in God, even when you have no idea what he was up to. And like Isaiah, you can say, "Here am I. Send me." Next week: practical. PRAY